

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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1. ORGANIZED LABOR'S UNENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSE TO
EUROPE'S DAY OF ACTION FOR FULL EMPLOYMENT SEEMED HARDLY
COMMENSURATE WITH BELGIUM'S DISTINCTION AS THE
COUNTRY WITH THE EC'S SECOND-HIGHEST RATE OF
UNEMPLOYMENT. THIS, HOWEVER, IS AN ACCURATE
REFLECTION OF THE LOW LEVEL OF RANK-AND-FILE
CONCERN ON THIS ISSUE. OF GREATER INTEREST PERHAPS ARE
THE POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNTRY'S
BUDGET SITUATION OF SOME OF THE DAY'S ORATORY -
DEFIANTLY PROTECTIVE STATEMENTS BY UNION LEADERS
CONCERNING BELGIUM'S COSTLY SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM.
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END SUMMARY

2. BELGIUM'S OBSERVANCE OF THE EUROPEAN TRADE
UNION CONFEDERATION'S (ETUC) APRIL 5 DAY OF ACTION
FOR FULL EMPLOYMENT WAS DUTIFUL, WELL-PLANNED
- AND UNINSPIRING. PRUDENTLY REFRAINING FROM ANY

ATTEMPT TO STAGE A MASS PUBLIC RALLY, ORGANIZED LABOR'S COMMON FRONT ALLOWED EACH ORGANIZATION TO DO ITS OWN THING. THE RESULT WAS A CONGERIES OF "ACTIONS" INCLUDING MOMENTS OF SILENCE, SHOP-FLOOR MEETINGS, AND A 24-HOUR WORK-STOPPAGE (IN THE DEPRESSED WALLONIAN STEEL INDUSTRY).

3. THE CENTRAL OBSERVANCE OF THE DAY WAS A MEETING IN A BRUSSELS AUDITORIUM WHERE GEORGES DEBUNNE (FGTB) AND JEF HOUTHUYS (CSC) APPEARED WITH THE ETUC'S MATT HINTERSCHIED. ADDRESSING SOME 800 ASSEMBLED TRADE UNIONISTS, DEBUNNE REAFFIRMED THE 36-HOUR WORKWEEK AS A PRIORITY GOAL OF BELGIAN LABOR AND CALLED ON THE COPENHAGEN MEETING OF EUROPEAN HEADS OF GOVERNMENT TO ACT TO GIVE MEANING TO THE RIGHT TO WORK. ADDRESSING THE QUESTION OF MEASURES TO MEET BELGIUM'S ECONOMIC/BUDGETARY CRISIS, DEBUNNE SAID THAT WORKERS HAVE ALREADY BEEN ADVERSELY AFFECTED BY AN EROSION OF PURCHASING POWER, THAT THERE CAN BE NO QUESTION NOW OF TRIMMING SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS.

4. HOUTHUYS SECONDED DEBUNNE'S REMARKS ON SOCIAL SECURITY AND WENT ON TO CHARACTERIZE THE STEPS TAKEN UNDER THE SPITAEELS PLAN (REF A) AS GOOD BUT INADEQUATE "TRANSITORY MEASURES". FOR HOUTHUYS, THE UNCLASSIFIED

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36-HOUR WORKWEEK MAY NOT BE THE MIRACLE SOLUTION TO UNEMPLOYMENT, BUT IT IS A USEFUL MEASURE. THE IMPORTANT THING, SAID HOUTHUYS, IS THAT GOVERNMENTS BESTIR THEMSELVES TO WORK OUT PLANS TO EFFECT A FAIRER SHARING OF AVAILABLE WORK.

5. COMMENT
WITH THE EC'S SECOND-HIGHEST RATE OF UNEMPLOYMENT, BELGIUM'S RESPONSE TO THE APRIL 5 "DAY OF ACTION" TO PRESSURE EUROPEAN HEADS OF GOVERNMENT TO TAKE EFFECTIVE MEASURES TO COUNTER UNEMPLOYMENT WAS HARDLY INSPIRING. BUT THIS IS AN ACCURATE REFLECTION OF THE RELATIVELY LOW LEVEL OF CONCERN AMONG THE RANK-AND-FILE OVER THE QUESTION OF UNEMPLOYMENT. AS ONE UNION LEADER PUT IT (PRIVATELY), "UNEMPLOYMENT IS THE CONCERN OF THE UNEMPLOYED - AND OF A FEW TRADE UNION LEADERS". OF GREATER INTEREST, PERHAPS, ARE THE POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF DEBUNNE'S AND HOUTHUYS' HARD-LINE REMARKS (RE SOCIAL SECURITY) FOR PRIME MINISTER TINDEMANS' CURRENT EFFORT TO REGAIN CONTROL OF THE COUNTRY'S BURGEONING BUDGET (REF B). OLSEN

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